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**Activity Theory as a Reflective and Analytic Tool for Action Research on Multi-Professional Collaborative Practice**

**Abstract**

**Context**

The 2004 Children Act in the UK mandated the integration and collaboration of services that worked with and for children and young people. The legislation was a response to the tragic death of Victoria Climbié. The Laming Report (2003) that investigated this case found that professionals had not worked together and this failing had led to Victoria's horrific death at the hands of abusive parents. The Labour Government launched the Change for Children: Every Child Matters Agenda. The policy was marked by the creation of the children's workforce; the children's workforce development council (CWDC); the children's workforce network (CWN); children's trusts; directors of children's services; integrated working, and a variety of tools to underpin them. Some (Parton, 2006) argued that this was a knee jerk response. Despite the changes, a shocking case of abuse came to light in Harringey in 2008, and the trust was found to have failed 'Baby Peter' due to service and practitioner inadequacies and the lack of integrated working. With the election of the coalition government in 2011 there were some reversals of this trend. The need for Children's Trust arrangements were revoked, schools were no longer required to integrate with children's services and the language of the previous government was banned (Puffett, 2010). In the same period, the spending review resulted in drastically reduced budgets for services, and integration, collaboration and partnership were presented as the way ahead in a climate of economic paucity. Collaborative practice has been presented as an unproblematic solution to complex social issues and reduced budgets and resources.

The focus of this research was to establish to what extent activity theory was an appropriate action research tool for teams of professionals seeking to understand how to work collaboratively .

**Literature Review**

Activity theory comes from the cultural- historical activity paradigm. This perspective takes account of the history and culture of the context, it places humans as agents of change within that context, who define the culture through their actions using tools, complying with or breaking rules (tacit and explicit), operating within a community that is directed to tasks through the explicit division of labour. This holistic system view takes account of all aspects of activity in the workplace, multiple realities and interacting systems. It sees human activity as constitutive of, and shaped by, work practices.

The first roots of activity theory arose from Vygotsky's (1978:40) revolutionary idea that mediating artefacts (tools) had influence over the simple stimulus response model of behaviour. The individual can no longer be understood without culture /

society and vice versa as objects become cultural entities. This was represented on a triangle of artefact, subject stimulus and response.

Leont'ev (1978) added the dimension of collective activity to the model. The top triangle represents the individual that is embedded in a wider activity system. Internal contradictions were viewed as the driving force for change. This is shown in figure 1 below.

FIGURE ONE

The third generation of activity theory took account of multiple perspectives and multiple systems building in Bahtkin's (1986) ideas of activity and Latour's (1993) actor-network theory. Gutierrez (1999) claims creation of a 3<sup>rd</sup> space, whilst Engeström (2001) demonstrates how it facilitates expansive learning. This is shown in the figure 2 below.

FIGURE TWO

There are 5 principles in an activity system:

1. A collective, artefact-mediated and object oriented activity system seen in its network relationships to other activity systems is taken as the prime unit of analysis.
2. The system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests, with the division of labour creating different positions for the participants, each with their own histories, and the AS itself carries multiple layers of history engraved in its artefacts, rules and conventions. This is multiplied in interacting AS.
3. Activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time, their problems and potentials can only be understood against their own history.
4. Contradictions have a central role as sources of change and development. These are structural tensions within and between activity systems.
5. Expansive transformation is possible as contradictions are aggravated and participants begin to deviate from its established norms. An expansive transformation has occurred when the object and motive of the activity have been reconceptualised to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity.

From these points, it can be seen that activity theory is not a specific theory of a particular domain, offering ready-made techniques and procedures. It is a general, cross disciplinary approach, offering conceptual tools and methodological principles, which have to be concretised according to the specific nature of the object under scrutiny. As such it is appropriate to any context, and to inter-professional contexts (Cottrell et al 2005, Leadbetter et al 2007, Daniels et al 2007).

There are many contemporary examples of the application of activity theory in children's workforce settings (Anning et al (2007:83), Robinson and Anning (2005:177), Edwards (2005:170) Leadbetter et al (2007:88)). Two in particular are useful for discussion here. In 2001, Engeström used his third generation activity theory (AT) model to develop learning in the Children's Hospital in Helsinki. 60

physicians participated in boundary crossing developmental workshops (DWR's) in which they viewed videotapes of patients' cases that demonstrated the issues that arose from a lack of communication and collaboration. His use of real footage of cases meant that 'the multivoicedness of the interaction took the shape of interlocking defensive positions', practitioners were unable to blame the child or family (who were often present) and this forced contradictions or double binds to surface. An example of this is that "In both the hospital and the health center, a contradiction emerges between the increasingly important *object* of patients moving between primary care and hospital care and the *rule* of cost-efficiency implemented in both." (Engeström, 2001:144). This example of expansive learning, facilitated by the use of AT in a DWR led to the construction of the concept of care agreement (with the related concepts of care responsibility negotiation and knotworking) by the participants of the Boundary Crossing Laboratory.

Secondly, Edwards and Kinti (2010) used an activity theoretical analysis of the Learning in and for Interagency Working project. This project used activity theoretical developmental workshops (DWR's) over three years of research with people who collaborated across organisational boundaries. They found that use of AT in DWR's developed traditional conceptions of stable work based learning to encompass constantly changing combinations of people across multiple boundaries. The discursive practice in the DWR facilitated the emergence of a hybrid professional, so the DWR negotiated new identities. New expertise was mediated by the use of boundary objects, such as a care plan. As such, Edwards and Kinti (2010:130) refer to the DWR workshops as 'neutral boundary zones'. Both these examples show the relevance of the model to activity within the children's workforce, across organisational boundaries, and its potential to lead to development and change through participative expansive learning.

Some have criticised activity theory however as not giving an account of how language is used as a tool in the development of practice, and in that it does not give enough account of power (Daniels 2007:99 and Williams, Davis and Black, 2007), however Daniels (2010) himself addresses this by using a DWR to expose power at play in his analysis of the Learning in and for Interagency Working project. Indeed Edwards and Kinti (2010:137) caution that DWR's can become 'sites of struggle over identity and knowledge' due to the personal contradictions that individuals experience listening to the narratives of others. Williams, Daniels and Black (2007:107) ask what methodologies and methods are needed to link the local to the macro in the development of AT in the future, whilst Daniels (2007:97) questions the extent to which AT has taken account of identity and culture in its conceptualisation of activity.

Activity theory offered the collaborative practice setting a range of benefits as it; takes account of complexity, takes a holistic systemic view (and multiple systemic), it is practice based, it is socially constructed and critically, it is developmental as instability in the system created change and expansive learning. Learning and development is prompted in an activity system by contradictions and discontinuities between conflicting areas of the activity system. Identifying these contradictions

enables reflection and reconstruction of the situation, and proposed new activity that can be transformative. When activity systems interact together, new elements from each may be introduced, creating a secondary contradiction within the system. These secondary contradictions are forces for disturbance and innovation and cannot be eliminated or fixed with separate remedies. These escalate if ignored, and often create 'double binds' for practitioners where all available alternatives are equally unacceptable. Engeström and Karkkainen (1995:319-333) argue that professionals' participation in such multiple contexts and multiple communities of practice may result in a model of expertise that is 'boundary crossing'. They found that physical artefacts (such as information sharing protocols) helped boundary crossing in that they become the new basis of expertise (ibid:331), reinforcing the validity of an activity theoretical analysis of this context.

My proposed use of activity theory in developmental workshop settings would include both individual and group analyses of activity systems (both generation two and generation three). I was limited to a certain extent by a lack of primary subject material (i.e. no narratives from 'clients'), instead, I used narratives of practice dilemmas, and models of collaborative working that the practitioners created themselves. It was important that these were grounded in real stories or cases to access real rather than espoused practice (Labonte, Feather and Hills 1999:42).

### **Methodology**

The research on collaboration was based in group and individual experiences, this therefore implied the need for an interpretive and socially constructed paradigm, as they reflected on, created, interpreted and related their own experiences. This also firmly situated the work as post positivistic, as the 'truth' was not objectively sought, but interpretations of individuals experiences of the truth were combined to reveal different perspectives and understanding of the phenomena of collaboration. This research was post positivist in that it sought to be idiographic and transferable (O'Leary 2009:7). The phenomena of collaboration was not well understood, it was complex, and deeply rooted in personal experience. These characteristics made qualitative approaches appropriate (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:32-33 and Gray, 2009:173).

The research aimed to develop collaborative practice as well as exploring it. The research question for the participants was 'how do we work together, and how can we work more collaboratively?'. The question for this paper is whether activity theory was an appropriate tool to answer that question. Participative action research (PAR) was therefore an appropriate methodology in that the researcher was 'journeying with' the participants to reveal the 'architecture of their practice' as revealed by their saying, doings and actions (Kemmis, 2009:471). The researcher and participants co-constructed meanings. The PAR developmental workshops were intended to increase the reflexivity and understanding of the participant leading individual action research. On another level, it contributed to my analysis of practice across the children's workforce leading to recommendations for action for the workforce as a whole.

The participants comprised a Workforce Development Workstream in a Children's Trust. This group comprised 20 senior managers and some senior leaders from seven different organisations who worked together in the Children's Trust, including: the police, children's services, connexions, the primary care trust, voluntary sector organisations, further education and the locality safeguarding board. 10 of the managers agreed to participate in the workshops, of these there was 50% attendance at each event (five – six people attending each).

The research tools did not need to elicit the 'truth' of the collaborative situation, they needed to explore different versions and perceptions of the truth as expressed in personal experience. Any exaggeration, embellishment or omission is construed as part of the individuals interpretive endeavour (Denning, 2005:181), and contributes to exposing the dilemmas and contradictions. From the epistemological position of multiple truths, 'crystalisation' (Richardson 1994:523) rather than triangulation was appropriate. From this perspective, many methods and many voices are seen to create different perspectives like different sides of a crystal. They create a coherent whole, but viewing the research through any side of the crystal will reveal a different truth.

Through the design of long and creative workshops I aimed to get to the 'reality' of the situation through reflection, rather than a surface interpretation and response. The developmental workshops commenced with activities that would gradually introduce the participants into the data sharing and analysis process. Individual definitions of collaboration, and discussions of the components of collaboration were planned to create a shared understanding of the term that we were exploring. Physically mapping the team and sharing stories of successful and unsuccessful collaborative situations were planned to develop the team's capacity to discuss their work together, and to develop the case that we would work on in the activity analyses. Four introductory creative activities were 'icebreakers' that paved the way into the activity theoretical workshop: definition debate, characteristics mapping, physical mapping and narratives. Creative tools are an effective way of eliciting depth of meaning as they stimulate reflection and surface the unconscious into the conscious (Gauntlett, 2010, Broussine 2008:25, McKintosh, 2010, Stuart, 2009). The individuals were then guided through a series of questions designed to elicit an activity theoretical interpretation of the team's functioning. Leadbetter et al (2008) developed seven guide questions for use with activity theory, but there was little other guidance on how to elicit an activity theoretical analysis. The questions I developed were contextual and were grounded in everyday language to make them easier to access. As shown in table 1 below.

#### TABLE ONE

The AT mapping of the collaboration was carried out by individuals in the group – each person creating their own second generation map. These were then brought together and we created a large third generation activity theoretical map of the dynamics of collaboration within the team. The activity theory diagrams of collaboration were analysed by the participants in the team. They searched the data for dilemmas, 'discontinuities' and contradictions, and these were documented on a

new activity theory diagram that served as a summary of their analysis. From this, participants could easily identify actions that they could take to develop their collaborative practice.

At this point the team was disbanded as a result of the spending review and I was unable to continue working with them as a group. Six months after the developmental workshop I carried out semi structured 1:1 interviews with each participant to see how things had changed for them since we last met.

The findings below, report some examples of what the participants found out as this shows how effective AT is as a diagnostic tool and I report on the quality of the changes that the activity theoretical analysis promoted as evidence of its capacity to lead to development and transformation.

### **Findings**

#### *Workshop One.*

The individuals discussed various definitions of collaboration, and from these drew out a range of 18 characteristics of effective collaborative practice. Discussion flowed around where there were team strengths and weaknesses and views differed to a large degree. Evidently the team members experienced collaboration in different ways. This initially awkward open debate paved the way for further frank exchanges, and the expectation that you could express your view in a research forum was established.

The team were then given sheets of paper and a large box of random items, and were asked to create a physical representation of the team. Despite initial misgivings, individuals were soon smiling ironically to themselves as they placed items on their paper. Figure 3 shows two examples of finished work.

#### **FIGURE THREE**

As each team member shared their 'mapping' with the others, it became apparent that they were using metaphor to analyse the collaboration of each organisation involved. Comments included the following:

*"The basket is large and could be the hub but isn't"*

*"The small shell, the police is always worth listening to"*

*"The footprint to show the area of the Children's Trust"*

*"The Children's Trust is constant and so a rock"*

*"Connexions is a nice sweet, it looks just looks good"*

*"Health are on their own and on the periphery".*

*Children's Services don't have enough hands for all the work that they have to do.*

This demonstrates that the team now trusted one another and were happy to disclose what they thought about each organisation in the safety of that PAR session.. To close the workshop, the delegates then shared stories of collaboration. This started a process of listening to one another intently as they recounted and recorded the stories in pairs. The stories were a mixture of positive and negative examples from within the group. These formed the basis of the next workshop. An example of a recorded storyboard is shown in table 2 below:

#### **TABLE TWO**

#### *Workshop Two.*

The participants reviewed the stories that they had recounted at the end of the last workshop, and chose one case to focus on with the activity theoretical analysis. I gave each participant a worksheet to record their answers on, and commenced a guided process where I asked them questions, they noted down their answers, and had a discussion before moving on to the next question. The individual activity theoretical maps showed how they each experienced collaboration in the group. One example is shown below in Figure 4:

#### FIGURE FOUR

The discussions around each element are summarised below.

**The Community.** Discussing the community was natural after the mapping exercise. The extent to which the other members of the individual's organisation would participate or not depended on how closely they felt that the aims of the collaboration were to their own day to day working: *"I bypassed the marketing and communications groups as it was too difficult to get them on-board. Training only came on board because I asked them to – they don't want to be involved, they just want to come in and do a piece and leave again. Involving my community is hit and run"*, contrasted to statements such as: *"My community is pretty easy really because it's all part of our work – so everyone in children's services and there is really good buy in."* This hindered the amount of effect that individuals could have in their own organisations.

**Tools.** The tools that were identified by the participants were all documentary – plans and strategies. These documents were not felt to be effective: *"I had the plan but never used it, nor the strategy. I never referred to it so we didn't use it."* The tools that were effective were boundary artefacts, such as the One Children's Workforce Rainbow that was used across the children's workforce as a common tool. This aligned language and created a common understanding of what collaborative practice looked like in day to day terms.

**Rules.** When discussing the rules of working with and for the workstream a number of interesting themes emerged. Where individuals felt that their role on the workstream was close to their day job, rules of engagement were straightforward. For others however the day job was very different to the role they fulfilled on the workstream and so joining the two up was highly problematic, and contributions to the workstream were limited. *"Maybe this is why there are challenges, as we have so many other areas to deliver in, so it's never central.. so not everyone in the workstream can do as much or contribute equally as it's just not their complete role."* This discussion shifted the perception that some people 'won't contribute' as emerged in the mapping, to some people 'can't contribute'. The attitude to others shifted significantly. One member disclosed to the group that the steer from their home organisation was not to do anything in the workstream, aside from attend: *"My rule when I first attended was 'go but don't do anything, just show your face'. It was an awful steer, ... I wasn't happy as I like to do, so I got involved"*. This really deepened awareness of how difficult some people's roles were made by managers in their home organisations. The rules for engagement within the group were courtesy based. The participants discussed whether this 'politeness' covered up significant issues that needed discussing, but came to a consensus finally that in fact it allowed



the members of the group to all participate, but that it slowed down action: *"In a multi-agency meeting I want to hear others and listen to their perspectives, so the politeness enables people to have good discussions but it curtails action"*.

**Division of Labour.** The participants were amazed to share perspectives on why they did things in the group, or how they felt labour was divided. One participant said that: *"It's the silences that I can't bear, I fill them! And I worry if I am stepping on people's toes when I then do say that I will do something!"* showing that her agency was initiated when the atmosphere felt awkward. A colleague was more driven by the ability to be effective: *"I will do stuff when there is an outcome, when there is a benefit to me doing it, and I will end up doing it when I understand it and have the big picture and can contribute"*. These two group members were clearly under the impression that actions were a prerequisite of being a member of the group, and were surprised to hear another member state that: *"My role wasn't to do stuff, was supposed to facilitate the group doing stuff. ...But I also don't like inaction, if things are not good use of other people's time or they are too busy or if it's a good thing for me to do I will pick it up."* The division of labour needed clear and transparent rules.

**Object 1 and Object 2.** The objective of each individual engaged was reported pretty unanimously as: *'wanting to have impact', 'seeing outputs', 'wanting to make a difference'*. The second object, that of the group as a whole, was however reported in different ways by the individuals as follows:

*"To develop multi agency workforce development that supports children and young people.*

*To enable and assist practitioners to do their jobs to the best of their abilities and to be the best workers and support to children and young people.*

*To deliver the CTB workforce development strategy and to meet personal interests, single agency interests and to gain status.*

*To universally develop a staff from different organizations to work more efficiently with children and young people."*

So whilst individuals were motivated by common factors, they all believed that the workforce group was functioning for different reasons. This was a surprise and shock to them. Focussing on the motives for the collaboration picks up on Nardi's (2005:37) suggestion that too much attention is placed on how collaborations work rather than on why people engage in them. Separating the object from the object motive is a useful counter move.

**The Subject.** When the participants reflected on what the subjects of their work might say about the case, they reflected that:

*"Well we don't have an account from them, what do we think the workforce would say? I think that they would be positive about things that they have seen but wouldn't know who organized them!*

*Beneficiaries would say that, well did say that things were good in evaluations after events, but they have no idea of the group or what we do."*

Not only did the various members discuss the content of the six areas of the activity system that they worked in, but they were also happy to have at times fierce debate from their different perspectives, as shown by the dialogue below:

*"T All the ways we failed (not to say that there weren't lots of successes) was in judging whether we were strategic or operational. This was a constant tension in the life of the workstream...front line worker like the IWC's should not have been there.*

*S But we needed a front line view, it's really important...*

*T ..But the tail shouldn't wag the dog...*

*S ...But what they have to say is vital, we must be connected to the front line.*

*T That is totally wrong, we must have a strategic focus, not an operational one!"*

The maps were then placed together. Jointly they represented how the group together collaborated. The participants gave insights and understandings of what they meant when placed together, and they constructed a map of all the contradictions, discontinuities and dilemmas. In this way the workshop involved the team progressing from a second generation to a third generation mapping exercise, and being enabled to identify, discuss and agree on the main significant contradictions where change were needed. These are shown in table 3 below.

#### TABLE THREE

Previously hidden contradictions or 'double binds' were surfaced, such as the workforce group tasked with developing integrated working having no recognition across the children's workforce in the county. These became the source of much discussion and action planning.

Finally, when asked what they thought to the activity theoretical session, two people replied that:

*"It's a great way to get stuff out and to dig really deep*

*This is useful to think of partnerships, it has shown different things and allowed some differences to surface along with contradictions. I propose that we should only come together on the areas that are in the centre of the venn diagram, that are really multi agency".*

I have not included data from the final interviews, as they were not activity theoretical themselves, however they have showed that the participants were largely unable to make changes to their practice as their context had changed so dramatically.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion.**

The discussion revolves around the key expectations raised about activity theory from the literature review as follows: Did it place individuals as agents of change? Did it take account of multiple realities? Can it deal with complexity? Is the system artefact mediated, and are boundary objects central? Do contradictions lead to expansive learning? Is activity theory appropriate for collaborative learning across the children's workforce?

#### **Change Agents.**

The individuals all developed a deeper understanding of their contributions to and interactions with the group. They developed a clear sense of collaboration and developed ideas that they could have implemented had the group continued. As such, the workshops, participatory in nature, did place the individual members as agents of change.

#### **Multiple Realities and Complexity.**

When working with groups of people developmentally it is tempting to reduce the complex to something simple and coherent. It is alluring to align divergent views, in the false assumption that simplicity, coherence and agreement will yield insight and action. This is not the case however. The developmental workshops that I ran encouraged debate and discussion, it celebrated dissent, and welcomed multiple perspectives. From this, clarity arose, not because of simplicity, but because the complexity and difference was made visible and tangible. Actions agreed from this basis were much more likely to lead to sustainable change.

#### **Artefact mediated expertise.**

The shared language and tools that the group adopted did facilitate change and learning for them. The leaders repeatedly cited the work using the 'One Children's Workforce Tool' as a good example of collaboration and their most significant achievement. This single tool bridged and spanned boundaries and created common ground for the development of shared expertise and hybrid professionals.

#### **The role of contradictions and expansive learning.**

Discovering contradictions helped the leaders to make sense of the difficulties that they experienced. It accounted for them being robbed of their personal agency, for actions stalling, and for the lack of collaboration across the group. Mapping the source of the contradictions allowed them to transcend previously blaming behaviours (Stuart, 2011) developing an appreciation of the barriers that were at play. This in turn led to them identifying and modelling new actions and ways of working. Although curtailed in implementing these changes by their end, the group did achieve expansive learning.

To conclude I will address the final question of the discussion:

#### **Activity theory and collaborative learning across the children's workforce.**

Work with this collaborative action research group (five members) over an initial three months revealed that the culture and structure of the organisations were relevant to the way that they worked together. Physical mapping revealed the interplay between them as agents of change and the professionals and contexts that they worked with. Narrative of collaboration revealed that they did not see any of their work as truly collaborative and that they were constrained by a culture of blame and professional rivalry and or discounting. Analysis of the individual and group activity of boundary spanning revealed difference in their inter-subjective focus. The object of their activity differed and they were working with different agendas. Tools and rules did not facilitate the collaborative working, and some individuals were construed as not having enough power to effect change within their own organisations, let alone across other boundaries.

The use of activity theory prompted multi agency working on the dilemma of collaboration. It surfaced new understandings of the situation from multiple perspectives, and allowed the group to move jointly towards expansive solutions. As

these changes were not implemented there is less evidence of the extent to which it could develop them as multi or hybrid professionals. The expansive learning was mediated by boundary objects and artefacts. It allowed multiple views to be expressed, transcended the previously blaming culture, and took account of complexity. Enabled consideration of the espoused and actual tools and how policy may be mediated into practice, and allowed the architecture of that practice to become visible rather than tacit. As such it is a valid and valuable developmental research tool for all people working in such contexts.

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